

VZCZCXRO0975
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0578/01 1201602
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 291602Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1667
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1196
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2192
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2487
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000578

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO
DOD FOR OSD EDELMAN/LONG/KIMMITT/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KJUS](#) [MASS](#) [IR](#) [AR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI REJECTS SAAD'S OVERTURES

REF: BEIRUT 571

BEIRUT 00000578 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons section
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Speaker Berri rebuffed March 14 leader Saad Hariri's attempt to respond to his call for National Dialogue, referring him instead to Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun as the opposition's negotiator. March 14 quickly condemned Berri's move as evidence the opposition is not serious about electing a president. Berri, meanwhile, issued a communique stating he was still waiting for the majority's response to his initiative. Free Patriotic Movement figures welcomed Berri's position and blamed March 14 for missing the opportunity to elect a new president. Berri's moves strikes as an obvious and shameful attempt to thwart any progress toward a solution, throw the ball (and with it, the perceived blame) back into March 14's court, and preserve his own self-perceived role as independent facilitator. End summary.

SAAD REBUFFED BY BERRI

12. (U) On April 28, Saad Hariri convened a meeting of March 14 leaders at his residence in Qoreitem to discuss Speaker Berri's proposal for a new National Dialogue. Following the meeting, March 14 issued a statement entrusting Saad to discuss with Berri ways to guarantee that the dialogue lead to the election of a president on May 13. Saad then phoned Berri to arrange an appointment, but Berri declined his request, directing him to speak instead with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun as the sole representative for the opposition.

13. (C) Ghattas Khoury, Saad's advisor, confirmed to Pol/Econ Chief that Saad had called Berri requesting an appointment to discuss his call for National Dialogue, but Berri declined, telling him to talk instead to Michel Aoun. Khoury said the problem was clearly Aoun, who did not want a presidential election, and the opposition was hiding behind him. "It's a yo-yo," Khoury complained. March 14 would wait a few hours

to see whether Berri would change his mind; if not, they would continue developing their strategy to "force" an election on May 13.

BERRI: WE ARE BACK TO SQUARE ZERO

14. (C) Speaker Nabih Berri reacted negatively to the March 14 statement (see statement issued by Berri's press office in paragraph 9, below). Ali Hamdan, his advisor, told Pol/Econ Chief that March 14's objective was simple: to limit the discussion to Saad and the Speaker, whereas Berri was insisting on the inclusion of all 14 dialogue members as the only forum for discussion of issues such as the new electoral law. Hamdan said both March 14 and Berri wanted to see an election on May 13, but Berri could not guarantee this without first resolving the other issues.

15. (C) We are back to "square zero," Hamdan said. Whereas Jumblatt had responded to Berri's call for National Dialogue in a "professional manner," Saad was imposing conditions. It's like refusing to apply for a visa unless you are guaranteed you will get it, he said. "This is not the way to respond," he said. Pol/Econ Chief countered that if Berri were serious about dialogue, he wouldn't close the door on Saad's attempts to respond to his call for dialogue. Hamdan noted the point.

AOUN BLOC DEFENDS BERRI'S ACTIONS

16. (C) Meanwhile, Aoun's advisor and son-in-law member Gebran Bassil accused March 14 of trying to play it half way by refusing to sit at the national dialogue table with all 14 leaders and instead trying to limit the dialogue between Berri and Hariri. Berri's answer was therefore appropriate,

BEIRUT 00000578 002.2 OF 002

he said, and an attempt to put things on the right track. Bassil also indicated that he does not see an election of a president on May 13.

17. (C) MP Salim Salhab, from Aoun's parliamentary bloc, echoed similar views and blamed the majority for not jumping at Berri's proposal for dialogue. He said the opposition already was prepared to make further concessions by accepting a general "declaration of intentions" in place of its prior insistence on things like a national unity government and Aoun presidency. Aoun MP Farid Khazen said the March 14 communique closed the subject of dialogue because it did not provide a substantive response. Michel Aoun will be meting with his bloc tomorrow, April 30.

COMMENT

18. (C) Berri's response came quicker than expected, leading us (cynically, we admit) to believe that he had already anticipated March 14's reply and precleared his response with Damascus. However, March 14 could be successful in throwing the hot potato right back at him, if, as we hope, it comes out quickly with strong statements depicting Berri as the one closing doors to dialogue, an accusation he has been fond of making against the opposition. Regardless of where this game leads in the short-run, however, we need to keep our eyes -- and those of March 14 -- focused on the end-game -- the May 13 election -- and avoid letting Berri's usual diversionary tactics distract March 14 from the real battle. End comment.

19. (U) Embassy translation of the statement issued by Berri's press office issued the following statement:

We do not consider the statement (March 14) as a rejection for dialogue. We have, however, to be aware that everyone is the guarantor for everyone. The guarantees requested by the majority are the same for the opposition (level of

representation in the government and which electoral district will be adopted in the next electoral law.) Only dialogue, with all and among all, is the guarantor for all parties. Naturally, starting with the election of the consensual candidate General Michel Suleiman, even before May 13, if we reach a "declaration of intentions" regarding the agenda before this date. When the white smoke comes out, we move from the dialogue room to the decision room. Once again, I appeal on everyone to stop playing the smart game. What is needed is to go back to March 2, 2006 (date which Berri launched his first national dialogue table) which achieved a lot.

Finally, I am still waiting for the majority's answer to respond with dialogue so that I will immediately send out invitations and set the date to convene the meeting. Everyone with you cares for May 13 based on reaching an agreement on the above mentioned topics.

End text.

SISON